

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 AF-10 SY-05 EUR-12 ISO-00 MCT-01 ACDA-12
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FM AMEMBASSY MUSCAT
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AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE
INFO AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY
USINT BAGHDAD PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY DOHA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY JIDDA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY MANAMA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY SANA PRIORITY
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 MUSCAT 0788

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, MU
SUBJECT: TERRORIST INCIDENT IN DHOFAR

REF MUSCAT0721

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1. SUMMARY: FIVE BRITISH TECHNICIANS WERE KILLED AND TWO ESCAPED
IN AN ATTACK BY UNKNOWN ASSAILANTS DURING THE NIGHT OF JUNE 1-2.
THE INCIDENT TOOK PLACE ON A BEACH EAST OF SALALAH, NOT FAR FROM
THE MOUNTAIN AREA WHERE THE REMAINING PFLO CADRES ARE HOLED UP.
MOST KNOWLEDGEABLE OBSERVERS ATTRIBUTE THE ATTACK TO PFLO. THOUGH
AN INCIDENT HAD BEEN EXPECTED ON OR ABOUT JUNE 9, THE MAIN PFLO
ANNIVERSARY, THIS ONE CAME A BIT EARLY AND CAUGHT EVERYBODY BY

SURPRISE. THE QUESTION ARISES WHETHER PFLO IS SWITCHING TO A STRATEGY EMPHASIZING TERROR IN THE CIVILIAN SECTOR. ENDSUMMARY.

2. A TERRORIST INCIDENT TOOK PLACE IN DHOFAR DURING THE NIGHT OF JUNE 1-2 IN WHICH FIVE BRITISH AIRCRAFT TECHNICIANS WERE KILLED. THE ASSUMPTION OF MOST KNOWLEDGEABLE OBSERVERS IS THAT THE PFLO CADRES STILL AT LARGE IN DHOFAR WERE THE PERPERTRATORS, THOUGH THE ASSAILANTS ESCAPED WITH FEW TRACES. THE OFFICIAL OMANGOV VERSION MAKES IT APPEAR THAT PRIVATE PERSONS MOTIVATED BY ROBBERY COULD HAVE COMMITTED THE CRIME. ADEN RADIO HAS NOT YET REACTED , AS FAR AS WE ARE AWARE.

3. FROM SOURCES IN SALALAH AND MUSCAT, WE PIECE TOGETHER THE FOLLOWING STORY: SEVEN BRITISH TECHNICIANS WORKING AT THAMRAIT FOR AIRWORK SERVICES LTD. (THE UK-BASED COMPANY THAT MAINTAINS OMAN'S MILITARY AIRCRAFT ON CONTRACT) WERE CAMPING FOR THE NIGHT ON THE BEACH FIVE KILOMETERS EAST OF TAQAH, A COASTAL TOWN EAST OF SALALAH. WHILE SEATED AROUND THEIR CAMPFIRE, THEY WERE FIRED UPON AT FAIRLY CLOSE RANGE. THEY ATTEMPTED TO FLEE TO THE BUS IN WHICH THEY HAD TRAVELED FROM THAMRAIT, BUT FIVE WERE GUNNED DOWN AND ONLY TWO MADE IT TO COVER UNDERNEATH THE BUS. THE ATTACKERS ESCAPED WITHOUT SEARCHING THE CAMP (A FACT THAT MKES IT DIFFICULT TO ACCEPT ROBBERY AS THE MOTIVE). OF THE TWO SURVIVORS, BOTH OF WHOM WERE UNHURT, ONE HID FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT IN THE WATER OFFSHORE, WHILE THE OTHER WALKED (SIC) TOWARD TAQAH. LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES PREVENTED HIM FROM GETTING HIS STORY ACROSS

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TO THE POLICE AT TAQAH, AND HE PROCEEDED ON TO SALALAH. THOUGH HE MAY HAVE BEEN GIVEN A LIFT PARTY WAY, HE WALKEDMOST OF THE DISTANCE INTO SALALAH. CONSEQUENTLY, IT WAS HOURS AFTER THE INCIDENT THAT HE WAS ABLE TO REPORT THE TRAGEDY. HELICOPTERS WERE DISPATCHED TO THE SCENE AT ONCE. INVESTIGATION SHOWED THAT THE AMMUNITION USED HAD BEEN AK-47 SHORT ROUNDS, PFLO'S STANDARD AMMUNITION.

4. NEWS OF THE INCIDENT SPREAD RAPIDLY IN BOTH SALALAH AND MUSCAT ON JUNE 2. THE BRITISH AMBASSADOR, WHO HAPPENED TO BE IN SALALAH WITH OTHER HEADS OF MISSION FOR THE AIRPORT CEREMONIES OF PRESIDENT NUMEIRY'S VISIT (SEPTTEL), WAS OF COURSE DEEPLY DISTURBED BY THE EVENT. AMONG OTHER CONCERNS, HE WAS WORRIED ABOUT THE REACTION IN BRITAIN WHEN THE NEWS HIT THE LONDON NEWSPAPERS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE INCIDENT WAS WIDELY COVERED IN THE BRITISH PRESS OF JUNE 4.

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5. THE AUTHORITIES IN DHOFAR REPORTEDLY ARE NOW ADVISING FOREIGN EXPERTS LIVING IN SALALAH TO STAY CLOSE TO THE CITY FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS OR SO. AS OPPORTUNITY HAS RISEN TO CONTACT AMERICANS THERE, WE HAVE RECOMMENDED INFORMALLY THAT THEY ADHERE TO THIS ADVICE.

6. COMMENTS: THE OMANI MILITARY AUTHORITIES HAVE BEEN BRACING THEMSEL
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A PFLO-INITIATED INCIDENT ON OR ABOUT JUNE 9, THE MAIN PFLO ANNIVERSARY. IN A SENSE, THEREFORE, THIS ATTACK IS NOT UNEXPECTED. YET THE EVENT ITSELF CAUGHT EVERYBODY BY SURPRISE. SEVERAL FEATURES STAND OUT, SHOWING HOW SKILLFULLY PFLO CAN SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES EVEN ITS CURRENT DECIMATED STATE:

(A) THE ATTACK CAME EARLIER THAN EXPECTED BY ABOUT A WEEK. APPARENTLY THE AUTHORITIES WERE NOT QUITE PREPARED. (THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT PFLO WON'T TRY SOMETHING AGAIN CLOSER TO JUNE 9.)

(B) THE SCENE WAS SLIGHTLY OUTSIDE THE MOUNTAIN AREA WHERE THE REMAINING PFLO CADRES ARE HOLED UP. THE BEACH ON WHICH THE AIR-WORK PEOPLE WERE CAMPED LIES ONLY A FEW KILOMETERS DOWN THE WADI DARBAT FROM PFLO'S ZONE, BUT BEING COASTAL IT IS CONSIDERED ON THE FRINGE OF THE INSECURE AREA RATHER THAN WITHIN IT.

(C) THE TARGET WAS CIVILIANS, NOT A MILITARY CAMP OR CONVOY. THE VICTIMS WERE PART OF THE BRITISH "SUPPORT ESTABLISHMENT" OF OMAN'S MILITARY FORCES. MILITARILY THE TARGET HAD VIRTUALLY NO SIGNIFICANCE, BUT IN TERMS OF TERROR AND PROPAGANDA THE IMPACT COULD BE GREAT. (LOOKING BACK ON THE INCIDENT OF APRIL 22 REPORTED REFTEL, WHICH INVOLVED A MILITARY TARGET, ONE WONDERS WHETHER IT WAS DESIGNED TO GET THE OMANI AUTHORITIES THINKING ALONG PURELY MILITARY LINES IN ANTICIPATION OF JUNE 9. THE ARMY COMMAND TOLD US AFTER THAT INCIDENT THAT IT WAS ACTUALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO MEETING THE ENEMY AGAIN AROUND JUNE 9, FOR ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ELUSIVE PFLO WERE RARE.)

(D) UNLIKE PFLO'S PREVIOUS HIT-AND-RUN ATTACKS AT LONG RANGE INFLECTING FEW OR NO CASUALTIES, THIS ONE WAS AT RELATIVELY CLOSE QUARTERS AND WAS DEADLY.

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7. THE QUESTION ARISES WHETHER WE ARE WITNESSING THE START OF A NEW PFLO STRATEGY STRESSING TERRORISM IN THE CIVILIAN SECTOR. SUCH A MOVE WOULD IN A SENSE BE LOGICAL FROM PFLO'S VIEWPOINT, GIVEN THEIR MILITARY WEAKNESS AND APPARENT INABILITY TO REVIVE THE INSURGENCY IN ITS OLD FORM. SOME OBSERVERS HAVE FEARED SUCH A SWITCH, NOT ONLY IN DHOFAR BUT MORE ESPECIALLY IN NORTHERN OMAN. UNTIL NOW, HOWEVER, THERE HAS BEEN NO EVIDENCE OF THIS CHANGE OCCURRING SOON. WE SHALL HAVE TO SEE WHAT SORT OF FOLLOW-UP PFLO COUNTRIVES TO THIS TRAGEDY.
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